Visions of Sublime Excess: Visionary Literature, Expansive Art, and Transformative Technologies in Ancient and Modern Buddhism

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Abstract: This essay traces certain threads of the "Buddhist sublime," from its articulation in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature to contemporary interpretations of interdependence. It first examines the visionary exuberance of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, whose lavish passages produce imagery designed overwhelm ordinary conceptual understanding and visualization capacity by collapsing temporal and spatial boundaries. This ancient vision of the sublime gets incorporated into modern Buddhist thought, mediating the tensions between Romantic visions of an interconnected, meaning-saturated universe and scientific accounts of an immense, indifferent cosmos. Contemporary interpretations of Indra's Net and Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of interbeing attempt to infuse a sense of the Buddhist sublime into secular understandings of the cosmos. These contemporary visions offer both consolation amid technological and existential disorientation and an ethical imperative to address systemic suffering and ecological crisis.

Keywords: sublime, Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra, Indra's Net, interdependence, emptiness (śūnyatā)

In the West, we often think of Buddhist art and literature as suggesting serenity, a contemplative mood exemplified by the ubiquitous images of the meditating

Buddha, Chinese landscape paintings, austere Japanese rock gardens, or minimalist black ink paintings; and certainly, these are important strains of Buddhist artistic expression. This idea of Buddhist aesthetics is also tied to an implicit understanding of meditation and spiritual practice: that practice is about bare awareness, letting go, cutting off—getting to the non-conceptual, simple, present moment. There is certainly a truth in all of this but it is a partial truth, drawn from specific traditions and texts and curated by moderns with particular leanings and purposes. But there is also a maximalist, exuberant, wild, visionary genre of Buddhist literature that I want to touch on here, partly because it is fascinating in its own right, and also because it turned out to have a decisive influence on recent articulations of Buddhism in philosophy, popular culture, and art. And I want to consider all of this in terms of the philosophical concept of the sublime.

This essay is itself rather maximalist—that is to say, a somewhat sweeping panorama rather than a deep dive into a focused research topic. This is because it was prepared for the annual Yin-Cheng Distinguished Lecture on Buddhism at Princeton University, sponsored by the Tzu Chi Foundation, and as such I used it as an opportunity to tie together a number of topics on which I have written over the years—Mahāyāna Sūtras, the modern Buddhist engagement with science and romanticism—as well as some new ones that occupy me currently, such as the Buddhist influences on contemporary art and ecological discourse. As an organization dedicated to bringing historical Buddhist teachings to bear on major issue of modern life, the Tzu Chi Foundation is exemplary of the subjects that have been a mainstay of my scholarly interest. I was honored to be invited to give this lecture and grateful to the Foundation for sponsoring this series.

The Concept of the Sublime

The idea of the sublime in the West came to prominence in the eighteenth century where it signified a sense of the lofty, the grand, the reverent, and the overwhelming. It is epitomized by feelings of awe when confronted by vast

landscapes, waterfalls, vistas, and raging storms. Often it involves a perception of vastness in relation to the tininess of the viewer; thus, there is frequently an element of fear. The sublime is best viewed from a distance; for example, a massive waterfall from a safe and solid bank rather than in a boat careening toward it—the latter would simply be terrifying. In his seminal work on the sublime, the eighteenth century philosopher Edmund Burke included among its characteristics a sense of obscurity that confuses judgement, magnificence of which one is in awe, and a vastness that is beyond comprehension.[1] Whether stormy and violent or peaceful and calm, there is a sense of ineffability, an overflowing of the bounds of language, an intellectual impasse at comprehending what one is confronting, and reverence and respect at something that surpasses ordinary understanding.

Although it is most frequently associated with Romanticism, which emphasized awesome natural phenomena, scholars have explored a variety of different "sublimes," over the last three centuries—cosmic, contemporary, ecological, technological.[2] Absent from virtually all of these discussions is what I would call "the Buddhist sublime," which seems, to those of us familiar with Mahāyāna Buddhist sūtras, a glaring omission. Examining the Buddhist sublime invites us to consider not only how ancient Buddhists were at the forefront of an early common-era explosion of visionary literature in South Asia but also how bits and pieces of Buddhism make their way into contemporary life and get transformed into something uniquely of the present moment. And in that vein, I also want to argue that there has emerged a distinctive "contemporary Buddhist sublime," illustrated by recent concepts of interdependence and metaphors like Indra's Net, that have their origins in the earlier Buddhist sublime; and, that both versions are heavily determined by the cosmologies, technologies, and artistic media of their respective periods.

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1 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful.*

2 Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*; Shaw, *The Sublime.*

Vision 1: The Buddhist Sublime

A radically new style of Buddhist literature emerged in the first centuries of the first millennium: sūtras generated by the Mahāyāna movement, which emerged in India and would spread throughout East and Central Asia. Many were sprawling, visionary, full of mythical beings, and detailed descriptions of altered states of consciousness, set in surreal environments. Perhaps the most striking example of this genre is the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, part of the multivolume *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*.[3] It is the story of Sudhana, who makes a pilgrimage around fifty-two sites in India to meet with bodhisattvas and learn their practices. These bodhisattvas include a diverse array of people including monks, nuns, ascetics, laypeople, children, practitioners of various crafts, gods, goddesses, a sailor, a doctor, a mathematician, and even a courtesan. Nearly half are women, all have their own unique ways of practicing and teaching, and all illustrate and exemplify various Buddhist virtues and abilities. Few of the encounters involve straightforward "lessons" on how to be a good bodhisattva or instructions on specific practices. Instead, they are rife with miraculous events, fantastical visionary experiences, and glimpses of other worlds.

We can see this literature as a kind of speculative fiction for illustrating Buddhist ideas and values. Through orcs, hobbits, dragons, and magic rings, J. R. R. Tolkien dramatized the confrontation of good versus evil, the value of loyal friendship, and the temptations of obsession and hunger for power. Sūtras like the *Gaṇḍavyūha* can also be seen as a genre of fantasy novel dramatizing Buddhist themes—compassion, skillful methods, spectacular powers associated with practicing the dharma, and the idea that the ordinary world is overflowing with hidden beauty, wonder, and meaning if seen through the eyes of heightened awareness.

Narrations of elaborate visionary episodes bubble up consistently throughout the text but are perhaps most dramatic and illustrative of the sublime in the last sections, when Sudhana encounters Maitreya, the buddha of the future, and the

[3] Two complete English translations of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* are in print: Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, and Bhikshu Dharmamitra, *The Flower Adornment Sūtra*. A translation of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* from the Tibetan by Peter Alan Roberts is at 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, https://84000.co/translation/toh44-45.

great bodhisattva Samantabhadra. In the penultimate chapter, Maitreya leads Sudhana into an immense tower. Going through the door, he sees that the inside space expands infinitely. Lavish scenery fills the space in all directions: glittering jewels strung throughout the sky, flowers, and immense palaces with archways, mirrors, turrets, chambers, sculptures, lush vegetation, singing birds, and lotus ponds. He views countless other similar towers, symmetrically arrayed in all directions, like a vast mandala. Covering the walls are complex and detailed mosaics displaying scenes of Maitreya performing the practices of the bodhisattvas throughout countless lifetimes, all of which have propelled him towards his current enlightened state. So Sudhana sets out on a quest to discover the practices of the bodhisattvas and here sees all of them on innumerable panels arrayed all around. He sees Maitreya, in a moment of time, performing all of the acts that lead to enlightenment. He then bows reverently and, at that moment, sees countless other versions of himself in all the other worlds within the structures. An infinity of worlds appears to be interpenetrating this one, with the entire cosmos present in each individual phenomenon, and multiple parallel universes extending endlessly in infinite space.

The final vision is similar, with Sudhana approaching the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, and again beholding infinite universes, this time in each pore of the bodhisattva's skin. He sees countless mountains, rivers, cities, villages, and all of their residents stretching back into the infinite past and forward into the future. Then, entering into the universes in the great being's body, he enacts the entire career of a bodhisattva in countless worlds, eventually becoming equal to Samantabhadra, then emerging back into the time of the story's narrative as if only a moment had passed. It is worth giving an extended quotation of his adventures in the pores of the great bodhisattva's skin in order to convey a sense of the lavish literary style:

> Then, Sudhana, son of a guild-leader, contemplating the body of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, saw in each pore of his skin untold multitudes of buddha-fields, each filled with countless buddhas. And in each of the buddha-fields, he saw the buddhas surrounded by assemblies of bodhisattvas. He saw all of these multitudes of lands situated and arranged

> in various ways, in various patterns, with multiple manifestations, mountain ranges, clouds in the sky, various buddhas arising, and various proclamations of the wheel of Dharma. And just as he saw in one pore, he saw in every pore, in all of the marks [of a superior person], in the limbs and parts of Samantabhadra's body. In each he saw multitudes of worlds, and from them emerged clouds of created buddha-bodies, as many as the number of atoms in all buddha-fields, pervading all worlds in the ten directions and bringing developing beings to full awakening.
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> Then Sudhana, guided by the words and teachings of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, entered into all the worlds within Samantabhadra's body and cultivated beings there toward maturity… As he entered one buddha-field with qualities as many as atoms in untold buddha-fields within Samantabhadra, so with each moment of awareness he entered more such buddha-fields; and as in one pore, so it was in all pores. In each moment of awareness, he proceeded further among worlds as countless as atoms in untold buddha-fields, going into worlds of endless eons—and still he did not come to an end… He moved through one buddha-field in an eon. He moved through another in as many eons as atoms in untold buddha-fields without moving from that field. In each moment of awareness he cultivated beings toward full awakening. Thus he continued until he achieved equality with Samantabhadra in his practices and vows, and with all *tathāgatas* in their pervasion of all buddha-fields, in their fulfillment of practices, in their full awakening, visionary transformations, and visions, in their turning of the wheel of Dharma, in their purity of knowledge, in their voice and speech, in their level of awakening, in their great friendliness and compassion, and in the inconceivable enlightening transformation of the bodhisattvas.[4]

Although upon first reading this literature can seem like a profligate gush of random, lavish imagery, it actually creates a specific kaleidoscopic structure in which individual things are multiplied infinitely in the imagined visual field and vast reaches of the cosmos are present in each of the tiniest particular things. The text insists that each individual thing contains the whole of the universe, while at

[4] Author's translation from Vaidya, ed., *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, 427–28, originally in McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 129–30.

the same time maintaining its own particularity—a particularity that, in turn, is itself reflected throughout every part of the cosmos. In this sense, the fundamental categories of time and space break down so that one thing is reflected in all things and events happening over eons are present in a single moment. Thus, the sense of the sublime emerging from this text is not so much from the sumptuous imagery drawn from the aesthetics of royalty—palaces, jewels, banners, etc.—but more specifically from the collapse of basic conceptual categories through which the mind works: identity and difference, space and time, large and small. The text seems intent on expanding the visual imagination to the breaking point, taxing the reader's capacities to visualize the unrepresentable: infinitely vast spaces contained in pores of skin or motes of dust; eons of events occurring in a single moment. While visual perception seeks to solidify and stabilize an object, this imagery invites the breakdown of such stability, thus invoking a sense of something beyond representation.

Modern theorists of the sublime have had much to say about this kind of phenomenon. The idea of the "unpresentable," for Kant, was the key to the sublime, particularly what he called the "mathematical sublime." In one account Kirk Pillow writes:

> Imagination runs into difficulty in trying to comprehend an object as a unity—the more parts, the more complex, the more difficult the task—whenever it faces something vast, elaborate, or complex enough to overwhelm its powers. In other words, some threshold exists beyond which the immensity or complexity of an object of reflection overwhelms imagination, which cannot take it all in.[5]

The onslaught of such imagery in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, page after page, can be exhilarating, overwhelming, as well as frustrating and even numbing. And just as our current firehose of imagery is brought to us by new, digital technology, the visionary geyser in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* was made possible by a revolutionary special-effects technology that allowed for incredible creative visions to take shape,

[5] Pillow, *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel*, 74.

perhaps unrivaled until the development of CGI: writing. The earliest body of Buddhist literature is of a completely different genre. The early sūtras were composed orally and had to be remembered; therefore, they have a pithy, repetitive, and formulaic style that makes for ease of memorization and recitation. As authors began composing texts in writing, they were freer to imagine elaborate scenarios, allowing considerable imaginative play in, for example, choreographing the activity and dialog of buddhas and bodhisattvas and imagining expansive configurations of multiple universes.

Not surprisingly, such audacious imagery inspired art and architecture throughout Asia; yet, representing such visual (im)possibilities is inherently problematic. Because of this rupturing of time and space, the expansive imagery of the text always seems to fall short in physical media, even in the great works it inspired, such as the formidable Javanese monument, Borobudur, and numerous paintings of Sudhana's encounters with bodhisattvas. This vision of the Buddhist sublime is quintessentially a product of the literary imagination.

Also important to the sense of sublimity is the fact that this text illustrates an interpretation of a foundational philosophical doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism: that everything lacks, or is empty of, a permanent, independent existence. Things only exist in relation to other things, and the boundary between this and that is only held together by concepts, language, and conventions, not by the object itself. An apple is not an independent thing; it only exists in relation to the tree from which it came, the nutrients in the ground, the climatic conditions in the atmosphere, and on and on. Our concepts, words, and conventions sketch a line around a certain part of this process and label it "apple," creating an illusion that it is a distinct, stable, independent thing. This means that there is a fundamental mistake about the way we interpret the world, and ourselves, as a collection of independent, stable entities. All categories of things exist only as relative, conventionally constructed entities and are empty of a permanent, essential reality. This means that no philosophical theory—not even a Buddhist one—can be ultimately true, because theories can only be expressed in concepts and language. While the Madhyamaka philosophers *argued* for this view (which they insisted was not really a view), the *Gaṇḍavyūha illustrates* it in an elaborate visual vocabulary that frustrates the

mind's ability to make of it a cohesive, visualizable whole. Like the Madhyamaka, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* makes room for conventional truth—the countless particular objects presented do not all merge into one undifferentiated reality but maintain their distinctiveness amidst infinite multiplicity. But their ultimate reality trails off infinitely and is unrepresentable. As the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* insists: "Every being is endless and boundless because one cannot get at its beginning, middle, and end."[6]

As the Romantic artists and theorists of the sublime were struck by the terrifying aspects of gushing waterfalls, erupting volcanos, and giant mountains, Buddhist thinkers were well aware that the vertigo of the unrepresentable, whether emerging from the stark dialectics of Madhyamaka philosophy or the visionary exuberance of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, could be terrifying. Some texts list among the qualities of bodhisattvas the ability to "tolerate" the realization of emptiness. The idea that everything one takes for granted is illusory, that the fundamental categories through which one apprehends the world are conceptual constructs, that everything meaningful is empty of fixed, stable reality, these ancient authors admit, can be downright scary and approaches the knife-edge of nihilism. The *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* maintains that only the well-trained bodhisattva, upon hearing this doctrine, "will not tremble or become frightened or terrified."[7] Nāgārjuna famously insists that "emptiness misunderstood destroys the slow-witted, like a serpent wrongly held or a spell wrongly executed."[8]

Vision 2: The Secular Sublime, Romantic Versus Scientific

In a 1983 essay by Isaac Asimov, the science fiction writer quotes Walt Whitman's famous poem, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer":

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6 Author's translation from Mitra, ed., *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, 49.

7 Author's translation from Mitra, ed., *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, 209.

8 Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 274.

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer
where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.[9]

Asimov then insists that Whitman was "talking through his hat" because, writing just before the twentieth-century explosion of knowledge about the cosmos, he "didn't know any better." He then dazzles the reader with the astonishing things that astronomy has learned: "worlds of red-hot liquid with hurricanes that could gulp down the whole earth; dead worlds with quiet pock-marks of craters; worlds with volcanoes puffing plumes of dust into airlessness; worlds with pink and desolate deserts—each with a weird and unearthly beauty that boils down to a mere speck of light if we just gaze at the night sky."[10] He then invokes the incredible cosmological numbers we have now grown used to: three hundred billion stars in the Milky Way, billions of galaxies beyond that, stretching out into immense numbers of light-years; unthinkable lengths of time extending back to the Big Bang and forward to an unimaginably distant future.[11] Asimov conjures a new sense of the sublime based on a re-envisioning of the universe made possible, in part, by new technologies such as telescopes, space probes, multiwavelength astronomy, and, more recently, space telescopes and computational technologies.

His essay illustrates the creative tension between two versions of the sublime in the modern period. The first is the romantic side, which insists on an inherent meaningfulness in nature, envisioned as an organism or spirit that we are a part of,

9 Asimov, *The Roving Mind*, 113.

10 Asimov, *The Roving Mind*, 114.

11 Asimov, *The Roving Mind*, 114–15.

and that we can intuit in the deep interiority of the mind. In Wordsworth's famous lines:

> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.[12]

This tension between the romantic and scientific sublime carries over into our time: between the image of an immense but indifferent physical reality governed by mechanical laws—a disenchanted cosmos with no ghost left in the machine and conferring no cosmically rooted purpose or meaning to human life—and the more romantic/transcendentalist intuition that insists on a natural sacredness in the mind and a conception of nature more as organism than mechanism, imbued with a life-force or spirit.

Vision 3: The Contemporary Buddhist Sublime

Buddhism, I have argued elsewhere, establishes itself in modernity as a mediator of this tension.[13] Promoters of Buddhism presented the tradition on the world's stage in the nineteenth century as the religion most in harmony with science. They emphasized its doctrine of causality, its lack of a quarrel with evolution, and its absence of a supreme god and immortal soul. Asian Buddhists countering the colonialist narrative of benighted, superstitious natives of Asia, along with

[12] Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798."

[13] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

Victorian seekers of spiritual meaning in the face of the radical new sciences of the time, coalesced on new articulations of Buddhism as the long-sought-after religion that did not contradict the increasingly hegemonic discourse of scientific rationalism. Yet these new articulations of Buddhism resisted reductionist and positivist narratives, offering the Dharma as an expansive empirical science of the mind. Interpreters in the twentieth century threaded Romanticism and Transcendentalism, as well as psychology, into this reconfiguration of Buddhism. These hybrid formulations were further strengthened in the late twentieth century with attempts at more explicit intertwinings of Buddhist thought with physics, psychology, and neuroscience.

An image has become popular in recent decades that captures something of this convergence—and of a distinctively contemporary Buddhist sublime—the jeweled net of Indra. This is an image originally from the Vedas, adopted by the Huayan school of Buddhism in China, and repurposed by contemporary Buddhists as the quintessential symbol of the contemporary Buddhist vision of an interdependent cosmos. It has gone through considerable changes from its classical presentations and has emerged as a central metaphor in modernist versions of Buddhism.[14] It imagines an infinite net spread throughout space with a reflective jewel at each juncture. In every single jewel, all of the countless other jewels are reflected, just as the image of that single jewel is reflected in all of the others. In contemporary articulations, Indra's Net appears at once to capture the infinite expanse of the cosmos and the various interconnected systems closer to home: the ecosystems of the earth, the networks of trade, capital, human migration, the communications networks spanning the globe, as well as the dense net of neurons that make up the human brain. It combines the romantic and scientific sublime with uniquely Buddhist contributions.

Thich Nhat Hanh's popular re-interpretation of the classical Buddhist concept of dependent arising—interbeing—captures the significance of the image in its contemporary sense. It emphasizes the interdependence of all things: the piece of paper is dependent on the cloud, the logger, the paper-processing plant, and ultimately, everything in the universe. In his words: "You cannot point out one

[14] Owens, "Inventing Indra's Net: The Modern Construction of an Ancient Metaphor."

thing that is not here—time, space, the Earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper…. The sheet of paper is, because everything else is."[15] Much of what Thich Nhat Hanh says about this interdependence of things could be asserted by a physicist or biologist, as he points out. However, by incorporating these facts into the wider sphere of Buddhist thought, practice, and ethics, he imbues them with a new sense of the Buddhist sublime. In his discussions of interbeing, he gestures often to biology, ecology, and physics. In one book, his discussion of Indra's Net immediately pivots to the physicist David Bohm's concept of explicit and implicate order.[16] In another, he alludes to galaxies millions of light-years away, then quotes Whitman to insist that they are not so remote but an integral part of everyone: "I believe that the leaf of grass is not less than the journey-work of the stars… I am large, I contain multitudes."[17]

Thich Nhat Hanh's interbeing, as well as the contemporary iteration of Indra's Net, constitutes not just an argument about how things are but an evocation of a particular sensibility: it makes for a feeling of being at home in the universe; a re-enchantment of the modern, secular cosmos. Indra's Net infuses Buddhist ideas and imagery into the secular universe, tuning it precisely to a contemporary social imaginary dominated by scientific hegemony, technological wonders, and environmental anxieties. It promises to embrace the scientific worldview yet offer an articulation of it in which humans are not just accidental plumes of consciousness in an immense, cold, and meaningless cosmos, but instead intimate parts of an infinite creative process, throwing up endless forms, all deeply interfused with each other. It nudges the alienating terror of the secular cosmic sublime, with its unimaginably vast spaces and temporal frames and its intimations of human insignificance, toward a vision of cosmic interdependence in which the tiny individual is an integral part of that vastness rather than an insignificant speck lost in it.

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15 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Heart of Understanding*, 4.

16 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Understanding Our Mind*, 81–83.

17 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings*, 59.

This project recalls the Romanticist reaction to the mechanistic philosophies of science in their time. As Emily Brady puts it:

> For the Romantic poets, the fearsome and disorienting effects of the sublime signal our more vulnerable position in the order of things, and at the same time provide an occasion for grasping the self as connected to something beyond itself: not merely as an individual, but as part of a larger whole. Nature is not articulated in narrowly instrumental terms. Certainly nature allowed varieties of self-transformation through individual encounters with beautiful and sublime places, but these transformations are best captured through ideas of interconnectedness…"[18]

What is decidedly absent from most modern articulations of interbeing or Indra's Net is an emphasis on buddhas, deities, rebirth, devotion, and other-worldly pure lands (unless one is alluding to theories of the multiverse in physics). It is this-worldly and aniconic—an interpretation of nature rather than an evocation of the supernatural or otherworldly. Contemporary Buddhist visions of interdependence tend to circumvent devotion in favor of perceiving systems in their incomprehensible complexity. These systems can be accounted for in completely naturalistic ways yet still evoke a sense of the sublime in that they approach unfathomability. It is a picture honed to resonate with the infinite complexity and interconnectedness of the many systems in which people today feel themselves enmeshed: biological, ecological, economic, neural, galactic, subatomic, and cosmic. Indra's Net constitutes a novel resacralization of nature that has spread beyond Buddhism and is now deployed by physicists, artists, ecologists, and devotees of psychedelics.

This vision of infinite interdependence also serves as an attempt to ameliorate the destabilizing effects of the technological maelstrom, the infinite connectivity of communication networks, which can seem like a storm of data tossing lives, nations, economies around like ships on one of Turner's stormy seas. Frederic Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard's dark, postmodern vision of the sublime

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[18] Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 107.

emphasized contemporary communications technologies and their destabilizing, fragmenting effects.[19] Indra's Net seems to assure that all the apparent chaos of the modern techno-world is subsumed within a vast cosmic harmony. Combined with modern mindfulness practices in the face of this newly cast infinity, this rendering of the contemporary sublime proffers the possibility of a more tranquil approach to the torrent—a fractal order from fragmented chaos.

And yet there is a dark side, as well, to the contemporary Buddhist sublime, though it is sometimes underdeveloped in Buddhist accounts. While interconnectedness can be a balm to modern nihilism and technological overwhelm, it is also evoked as an ethical, political, and ecological alarm bell. It recognizes the capacity for reverberating harm to communities, ecosystems, and political life as pollution, structural violence, and war race around the world at unprecedented rates, supercharged by online communication, advanced technologies, and global capitalism.

There is, therefore, a tension inherent in contemporary Buddhist visions of interdependence: they have the potential either to evoke a dispassionate vision of cosmic harmony inclined to lull one into transcendent passivity or to inspire urgent attention toward reforming the immense systemic causes of suffering in our economic, political, and social systems. In this sense it sometimes represents, particularly among socially engaged Buddhists, a new vision of global ethical and ecological responsibility.

I bring up this decidedly contemporary understanding of Buddhist interdependence not just because it bears some resemblance to the earlier Buddhist sublime illustrated by Sudhana's adventure in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Contemporary Buddhists identify this very text as the source of the current metaphor.[20] Although

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19 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime.*

20 This continuity is less direct than is often presented, as uniquely contemporary concerns have shaped the metaphor in significant ways, as Owens shows: "20th century figures in Indra's Net's genealogy attempted to construct something new out of various fragments of historical texts, and where these were not sufficient, elaborated on the metaphor in their own terms. This has influenced not only how Indra's Net has been understood by Western Buddhist popularizers, but

the story of Sudhana and his visionary encounters may seem like something stranded in time, a product of a mythical past displaced by the modern, technology-saturated world, its contemporary reimagining has entered decisively into the way people today think of that world. While Sudhana's visions are its distant ancestor, Indra's Net today is a decidedly contemporary phenomenon, curated and fine-tuned to the anxieties, technologies, cosmologies, and crises of the day.

Finally, if even the most magnificent paintings, temples, and sculptures of ancient Asia weren't quite able to capture the literary sublimity of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s spectacular visions, new genres of Buddhist-influenced art, sometimes enabled by novel technologies, now make some formidable attempts, illustrating the tranquility-inducing, as well as the anxiety-producing, aspects of the contemporary Buddhist sublime. Yayoi Kusama's famous *Infinity Mirrored Rooms* are often invoked to illustrate Indra's Net. They are small rooms, completely mirrored so that reflections of the lights and objects in the room, including the viewer, extend infinitely in all directions, creating a destabilizing and vertiginous sensation in which the self and world fragment into innumerable images, yet are all contained within a coherent whole. Taiwanese-American artist, Nick Dong, works in a similar genre, creating objects and immersive installations drawing from Buddhist themes and texts. Other contemporary Buddhist-inspired artists, like Gonkar Gyatso and Tenzing Rigdol explore the darker side of interdependence in an age of media saturation, violence, and climate change. In a forthcoming article in this journal, I will examine these contemporary expressions of the sublime in Buddhist-influenced art.

Today, there is renewed scholarly interest in the concept of the sublime: the cosmic sublime, revealed in the newly discovered, unfathomable expanses of the universe; the ecological sublime, illustrated in the intertwined and increasingly fragile systems of the biosphere; and the technological sublime, exemplified by the massive restructuring of the planet by human hands as well as the fashioning of artificial intelligences that have already outstripped our abilities to fully comprehend. Buddhism has always embodied a creative tension between the

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also by academic researchers and prominent non-western practitioners as well." Owens, "Inventing Indra's Net," 8–9.

wonderment of transcendent states and the compassionate concern for relieving suffering of people in the everyday world. Overemphasis on the former gave rise to the corrective model of the bodhisattva ideal—the one who sacrifices her own transcendent bliss to work for the benefit of sentient beings. Today, Buddhist movements have emerged that attempt to strike the balance between these two tendencies: to appreciate the wonderment of the infinitely complex world while not giving way to passivity but acting in social and political realms. Indra's Net is an example of one way that contemporary Buddhists have repurposed ancient imagery of the sublime to combine the aspiration to transcendent states of consciousness with the impulse to act in socially and politically beneficent ways. Sudhana, the ancient pilgrim of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, would have been astonished.

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